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The Stars of Freedom

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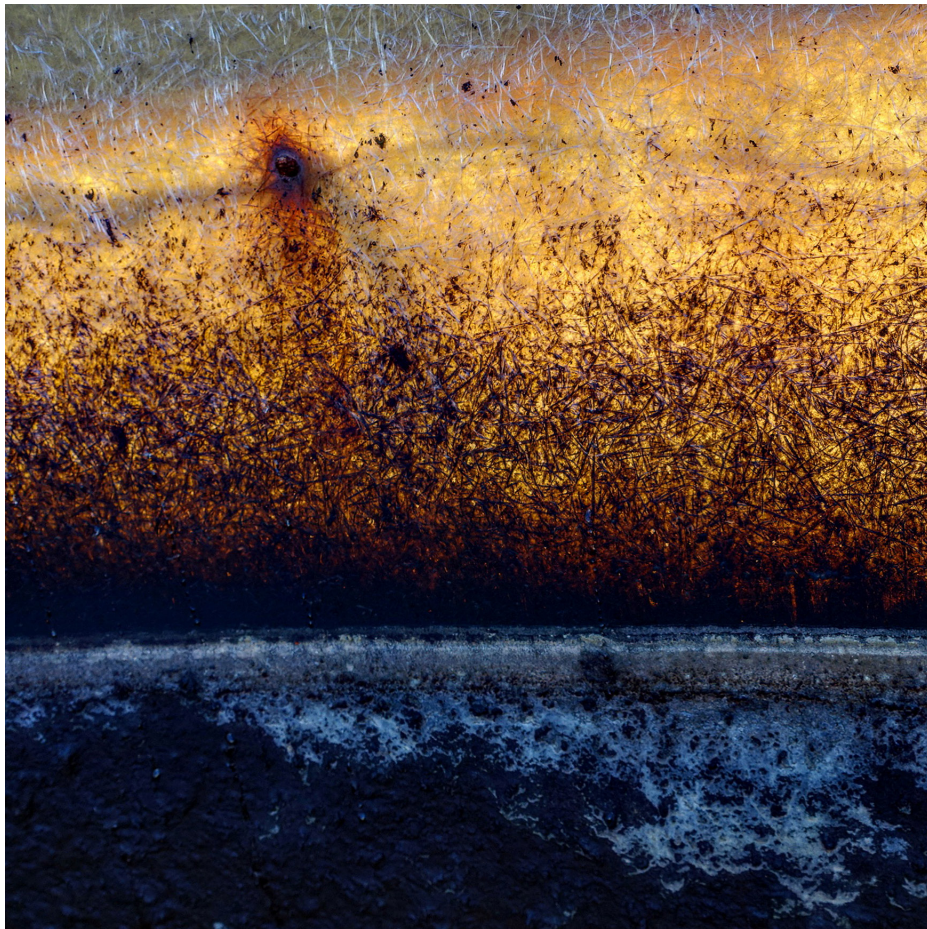
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On today's walk I found that large pieces of comet N2F3 continued to rain down into the liquid methane ocean on Saturn's moon Titan

Mike Miller

THE STARS OF FREEDOM

In pre-Civil War America, escaping slaves learned elementary astronomy, journeyed toward the Big Dipper, and made their way to freedom.

I don't take to "[slaves]" off the plantation. This way they don't know which way is east, which way it is to the west. Once they have figured where someplace else is—next thing you know, they'll know which way it is to the north.

This statement by Mr. Ames, a slave overseer in the film version of Alex Haley's *Roots*, grimly illustrates the extreme measures Southern plantation owners used to keep their slaves from escaping. These efforts were desperate, often violent, and ultimately futile. Slaves knew freedom awaited them in the northern United States and Canada, and they knew how to find it. They learned the sky.

Ames never suspected that slaves knew observational astronomy because they carefully concealed that knowledge. Only recently have scholars begun to discover the slaves' celestial awareness—especially of the northern sky—and the unique way they camouflaged their education. An allegorical song called *Follow the Drinking Gourd* was one such avenue to freedom.

ACCIDENTAL FOLKLORE

In 1912 an amateur folklorist named H. B. Parks accidentally overheard an African-American singing a folksong in North Carolina that was new to him. To Parks the song seemed to make no sense, and no one would offer him an explanation. In 1913 he

heard it again in Louisville, Kentucky, and again his inquisitiveness was answered by silence from the song’s performers. Finally, sometime after 1918, he met someone in Texas willing to explain it. The cryptic lyrics, Parks learned, described a sky and land map directing slaves out of the South and toward freedom.

The song was taught to slaves by an itinerant carpenter named Peg Leg Joe. Parks suspected this man might have been connected with the Underground Railroad, a well-organized group actively working to help slaves escape in the decades prior to the Civil War. As former members of the Railroad later confirmed, Peg Leg Joe would usually arrive in the South during winter, teach the song as he moved from plantation to plantation, then leave in the spring. Many of the slaves visited by Joe eventually began successful flights to the North.

THE SONG AND ITS MEANING

The term *Drinking Gourd* is masked language for the Big Dipper. The song uses the Gourd rather than Polaris because the briefest allusion to the Gourd was a sufficient reminder of what to look for, and slaves would not have created a song that openly named the Little or Big Dippers or

Polaris. In childhood, slaves learned the significance of Polaris and how to locate it with Ursa Major’s pointer stars.

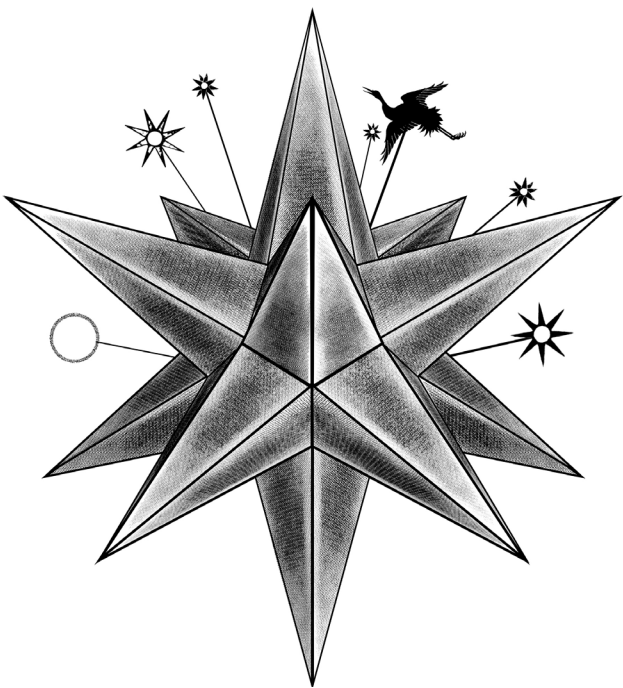
Here are the complete lyrics for the song, accompanied by an interpretation of each stanza.

*When the sun comes back
And the first quail calls
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
you to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

The song instructs slaves to begin the trip north in winter. When the sun comes back refers to the months after the December solstice, when the sun begins to climb higher into the northern sky. The calls of migratory quail, wintering in the southern United States, would have been heard during this season. Again, the Drinking Gourd is a variation of the Big Dipper asterism. The old man is Peg Leg Joe.

*The riverbank makes a very good road.
The dead trees will show you the way.
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.*

This verse instructs the escaping slave to travel north along the Tombigbee



Extinction Star Prototype
Douglas Baulos

River, which originates in northeastern Mississippi, flows south along the Mississippi-Alabama border, and empties into the Gulf of Mexico near Mobile. Dead trees found along the bank would bear drawings of a left foot and peg foot and thus serve as signposts for those attempting the northward trek. These markings, done in charcoal and mud, distinguished the Tombigbee from other rivers and provided guidance on the overland route from

the Tombigbee to the Tennessee River. Curiously, directions to the Tombigbee are not part of the song.

*The river ends between two hills
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
There’s another river on the other side
Follow the Drinking Gourd.*

The third verse instructs slaves to go north over the hills to the Tennessee River and follow it north. This river winds



Moonrise over Wichita
Cary Conover

northward across Tennessee and Kentucky before flowing into the Ohio River.

*When the great big river meets
the little river
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
you to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

The final verse instructs the slaves to persevere across the Ohio River, to be met by a guide on the north bank. Since the Ohio River is much too wide and swift for most swimmers, fugitives were forced to stop and secretly locate transportation. However, the river usually froze in the winter, and an escapee could walk across the ice without spending time on the south bank. Thus, those in the Railroad concluded that winter was the best season to escape. The distance between Mobile and the confluence of the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers is 800 miles, though the winding routes of the rivers made the trek much longer. Most slaves from the Deep South probably needed at least a year to reach the Ohio River.

Why this serpentine, difficult route? Between 160,000 and 200,000 slaves lived near the Tombigbee River. The “line” served a large population, the

rivers acted as natural highways, and the route terminated close to several main Underground Railroad lines in the North.

*Follow the Drinking Gourd, follow the
Drinking Gourd
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
You to freedom
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.*

The song implies Joe alone was responsible for the route, and he probably helped create that illusion. Slaves would have been suspicious of instructions from unknown whites. Moreover, Joe’s guise of sole responsibility protected other law-breaking Southerners.

Could the slaves on this route actually use the Gourd, and would it substitute for the more accurate candle of the north, Polaris? The answer is yes. Most of the route was heavily forested, leaving only partial windows to the night sky. A few stars in the Gourd would have been much easier to see than Polaris or dim Ursa Minor. Since the fugitives had to maintain only a general course north and Ursa Major remains steadfastly circumpolar, the Gourd was an adequate beacon.

SURVIVAL OF A LEGEND

The creation of such an instructional song was archetypal slave behavior. African slaves brought a rich tradition of creating songs and using them constantly in everyday activities, one of the few habits that owners did not attempt to control. In Africa, song was interwoven into tribal culture to transmit information. But in America, slaves composed many songs to keep crucial secrets from whites. These became codes that could not be recognized or interpreted by whites because their lyrics used masked language, words that seemed innocuous but managed to convey the signals for survival.

Because both Polaris and freedom lay in the North, the former came to symbolize the latter, and many references to freedom were couched in terms of a star. The railroad adopted that language, and it is still used today by those writing about the antebellum era. Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave and prominent journalist, named his newspaper *The North Star*.

In 1928 Parks published the song and its story in an obscure magazine, *Publications of the Texas Folklore Society*, under the title *Follow the Drinking Gourd*. The song might have been totally forgotten save for the work of a prominent folklorist, B. A.

Botkin, who retold the song and its story in his *Treasury of Southern Folklore*. Apparently, neither Parks nor Botkin fully understood the history and significance of the song. Masked as folklore, the legend languished.

But its years of obscurity seem to be ending. In 1988 Jeanette Winter published a popular children's book called *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, the fictional account of a slave family that flees to freedom by using the song. Since then this legend has appeared in elementary school textbooks and is widely studied by schoolchildren.

Escaping slaves faced overwhelming obstacles. They had to travel alone and at night over strange terrain. They and their families were almost exclusively concerned with survival, so skywatching wasn't an activity to be engaged in for its own sake. The astronomy important to them was learned for its practical value, and even that was so dangerous that they concealed their awareness of the sky. As a result, unlike other cultures, African-American songs and stories on celestial topics are scarce. *Follow the Drinking Gourd* survives as a beautiful and rare exception.

Gloria D. Rall, *Sky & Telescope*,
February 1995, p. 36. All rights reserved.
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Moonset over Wichita
Cary Conover